A HEBREW DICTIONARY
on Historical Principles

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The rapid development of Hebrew as a spoken, literary and scientific language, and the advance of Hebrew linguistics, have made the compilation of a complete, authoritative dictionary of the language, spanning all of its three thousand years, a basic necessity.
Dr. Ben-Hayyim, Professor of Hebrew Language at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Vice-President of the Hebrew Language Academy, heads the team of scholars engaged on this lexicon. His published works include *Studies in the Traditions of the Hebrew Language* (Madrid, 1954) and *Ivrit We'aramit Nusah Shomron* ("The Literary and Oral Traditions of Hebrew and Aramaic among the Samaritans"—Jerusalem, 1957–61), 3 Vols.

Consideration of the semantic changes and etymological speculations of Hebrew words goes back, among the Jews, to ancient times. The beginnings are already clearly evident in the Bible, in incidental notes, such as: "For he that is now called a prophet was beforetimes called a seer." (I Samuel 9,9); or in exegesis of proper names like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Deeper philological reflection forced itself upon the Rabbis of the Talmudic era. The *Halachic* authorities were required, at times, to furnish precise legal definitions of terms in the Torah upon which the *Halachot*—religious laws—were based, or from which support for the laws was derived. The homiletical expositions had to interpret words of the Torah to their audiences in the spirit of the times and in the language they understood, since the latter had already diverged to a lesser or greater degree from the language of the Bible times. Thus without philological intent, in the narrower sense, observations were made, and conclusions drawn, which to this day

constitute a valid contribution to the study of Hebrew words, especially in the area of synonyms.

Hebrew Lexicography's Venerable History

Nevertheless, many generations had to pass before a systematic study of the Hebrew vocabulary was undertaken. The first attemps were made in the ninth and tenth centuries. During the Golden Era of Hebrew letters in Spain, dictionaries were compiled, and lexical studies published, by scholars whose main preoccupation was with the language. Especially noteworthy is the *Sefer Hashshorashim* ("The Book of Roots") of R. Jonah ibn Ganah (eleventh century), which in method and approach set the pattern for Hebrew lexicography for hundreds of years, indeed until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Hebrew lexicography, accordingly, has a venerable and distinguished history. From the Reformation onwards, non-Jewish scholars have participated in it to an increasing extent. Yet all the dictionaries compiled during this long period, however varied the material they covered (Bible, Talmud, other sources), and however widely they differed in other respects, shared one characteristic. They were partial, specialized works restricted to certain determinate categories of literature. No dictionary even attempted to embrace the entire Hebrew language from its beginnings to the time of compilation. Indeed, they did not seek to render a full vocabulary of the language at any given time or in any defined area; the authors were interested in supplying an instrument for comprehension of a special literary field. Their purpose was philologico-exegetical rather than historico-linguistic and the character of the works was shaped accordingly —both in regard to the words they included (or omitted), and in the amount of attention they devoted to "difficult" and uncommon words.

The founders of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ("Judaic Science") in the previous century keenly felt the absence of a complete scientific dictionary of the whole Hebrew language which would portray the historical evolution of its vocabulary in every form of literary expression: prose and poetry, science and law. Leopold Zunz, doyen and teacher of Judaic scholars, gave poignant expression to this disability under which he and his colleagues laboured. "If, by a Hebrew dictionary," he wrote in 1856, "we refer to the vocabulary of a people that writes and speaks Hebrew, then such a work is not yet in our possession." Decades were to pass before this awareness ripened into action and Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1857–1922) the pioneer of modern spoken Hebrew embarked upon his

sixteen-volume dictionary. This *Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* is the first work of its kind inspired by a recognition of the unity and historical continuity of the Hebrew language. Eighty years elapsed from the day Ben Yehuda launched his immense self-appointed task until the final volume was completed by Professor N. H. Tur-Sinai, President of the Academy (who edited the last seven volumes). This is not too long a period for the execution of such a project, which was undertaken by a small number of people.

Only a few years have passed since the publication of Ben Yehuda's monumental work and the question arises: Does any need remain for a new historical Hebrew dictionary?

In replying to this question there are features of Ben Yehuda's *Dictionary* that must be borne in mind. First of all, its form was fixed when the author began his labours eighty years ago. It is unnecessary to expatiate on how far our knowledge of the various branches of Hebrew literature, whose vocabulary must be incorporated in such a dictionary, has expanded and advanced. Many works of other ages, previously unknown or extant only in fragmentary form, are now available in scientific editions. Numerous studies of Hebrew words of all epochs, which have deepened our knowledge of the history of the language, have been published. Professor Tur-Sinai did all that any scholar could do to accord with our present knowledge of Hebrew, and to fulfil what we require of an historical dictionary, yet, as a whole, the work falls short of our needs and what we can presently hope to achieve. In truth the compilation of a lexicon of a language spanning three thousand years is so formidable a feat that only an intrepid individual like Ben Yehuda could ever have dreamt of being able to accomplish it. When Zunz wrote a hundred years ago of the need for such a thesaurus he clearly understood that "a comparative, complete, authentic dictionary would be a worthy achievement of an academy of sciences."

It has long been clear that an historical dictionary comprising all the strata of the Hebrew language and based upon a penetrating study of the entire vocabulary could never be compiled by a single scholar. Of necessity, it would have to be the combined effort of a team and preceded by many years of preparation. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, the Hebrew poet who headed the Waad Halashon ("Hebrew Language Committee"), which preceded the Hebrew Language Academy, conceived the idea, returned to it on every opportune occasion, and constantly urged that a start be made. It was Professor Tur-Sinai, then Vice-President of the

Waad Halashon, who elaborated a plan for the compilation of a series of dictionaries embracing the whole literature, to be sponsored by the Bialik Institute. But another eighteen years were to go by before the Hebrew Language Academy in conjunction with the Institute finally embarked upon this task. Work of organization began in 1954 and, though the editorial staff has remained small, the dictionary is in process of compilation.

Problems and Semantics

There are two distinct methods that may be adopted in the work of compilation. The first envisages a comprehensive vocabulary covering all epochs of the Hebrew language, similar to the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles,* commonly known as the *Oxford English Dictionary.* This is a lexicon of all English words from the seventh to the nineteenth century. The other method is to complete a *continuous* series of dictionaries of shorter periods, which, put together, would provide the language with one complete work. Here there is no guiding precedent; the idea, however, has been argued with increasing cogency in recent times. Both methods, of course, were thoroughly discussed by the Editorial Board, both from the theoretical and the practical points of view. For the present, that is, in the preparatory stages, it has been decided to work on two distinct units, biblical and post-biblical Hebrew. The division is dictated by the different state of our knowledge of each branch of the language. We possess the complete vocabulary of biblical Hebrew in the twenty-four books of the Scriptures, and a few external sources. Every single word of the Bible has been scrutinized from every possible angle, over a period of hundreds of years. Whoever wishes to compile a biblical dictionary has no reason to seek for words that have been lost. After due investigation of what has already been achieved in biblical lexicography he can proceed with the actual labour of editing. This is not the case in regard to the rest of the language. The vocabulary of certain sections has been collected and studied, but most post-biblical literature still requires thorough and systematic lexicographic treatment. Years must pass before the work of collection is completed and this raw material readied for scientific processing. Obviously, therefore, different methods must be followed.

The primary concern of the editors in regard to post-biblical Hebrew is the collection of all dictionary terms. This material must be as complete as possible. It is in determing the identity of a word that the task of the historical lexicographer assumes increasing complexity. Languages change

in the course of time. They discard old and adopt new forms. Not only does the semantic content of a word undergo change to a lesser or larger degree, but even the outer form of words becomes different. In written Hebrew, these variations occur on two levels, in the spelling and in the vowel-pointing. It is a function of an historical dictionary to present these changes, the transition from one form to another and from one meaning to another. Many words have deviated in the post-biblical period from the norms to which we are accustomed in the Bible. The historian of the language is confronted in this instance by the question: To what extent may a certain form be considered a mere variant of the given word, and when must it be declared a word in its own right, a new term derived from an old one? Anyone familiar with Hebrew will agree, without hesitation, that each of the following pairs presents the same word spelt or pronounced differently: פַּרְבָּר – פַּרְוָור; שְׂרְטֵט – סְרְטֵט הַסְפָּקָה – אַסְפָּקָה. But would he, with the same degree of confidence, make the same judgement concerning דְּחַק – דַּחַק *(dehaq-dohaq)* גְּמָר – גֶּמֶר *(gemar-gemer)*; דְּפוּס – טְפוּס – טוֹפֶס *(defus-tippus-tofes)*; הִתְעַכֵּל – הִתְאַכֵּל (*hit'akel-hit'akel*) and many similar words? Taken historically the problem of the identity of a Hebrew word poses immeasurable difficulty from the point of view of meaning. In Hebrew, in the course of eighteen hundred years, the main development necessarily was not in the creation of new words or in changing old forms into new ones, but overwhelmingly in the proliferation of meanings of existing words. Old words acquired new meanings, differing widely from the original and, sometimes, in Hebrew a word can be its own antonym.

So we find, for instance, the word חִיּוּב *(hiyyuv)* appearing in the Talmudic vocabulary as the opposite of זְכוּת *(zechut)* ("From his merit — זְכוּתוֹ you deduce his guilt—חִיּוּבוֹ "); while in our times the adjective חִיּוּבִי has a "good" connotation; e.g. a worthy person. אִישׁ חִיּוּבִי *(ish hiyyuvi)*; a positive approach — גִּישָׁה חִיּוּבִית *(gisha hiyyuvit)*. Or take a different example: the word בּוּל (*bul*). In the Bible it designates (1) a month of the year; (2) harvest; (3) a lump. In the course of time it acquired additional meanings: (4) a postage-stamp (apparently under the impact of the Turkish), and (5) bull's eye in a target (taken from the English). For the most part, however, the semantic relationships between words in the earlier epochs of the language are far less evident than appears in the above

example. The purpose of the historical dictionary is to portray the semantic transformations of each word, to show how one meaning grew out of another, or how a meaning from an external source became attached to an existing word, and so expanded and complicated the group of concepts embraced by that word. The time when this expansion took place must be indicated as precisely as possible. The unravelling of this semantic complexity of the word through the ages is considerably more difficult than discovering new forms which the Hebrew language has adopted at various times. The staff employed in the compilation of the type of dictionary we have in mind must, accordingly, be scientifically-trained and qualified to excerpt what is new in form and in content in each word, appearing in a widely ramified literature. Fifteen hundred readers were employed by the Oxford Dictionary. They collected for the editors all the words found in English literature. No smaller number would be required for our Hebrew historical dictionary (but we know that such qualified manpower is not available). We might be willing to rest content with fewer—which, obviously, would prolong the preparatory phase—but even the smaller number cannot be enlisted in present circumstances. However, automation in preparing the lexical analysis of all the literary material which it is intended to cover will enable us to surmount this obstacle. The editors assume that a relatively limited group of trained personnel will be able to collect and arrange expeditiously the words that they need by the use of modern methods, since much of the time required for setting up the card-indexes is devoured by purely mechanical activity. This part, at least, can be done by a computer. The preparations presently in full progress. Their main features are: every work (listed in the *Sefer Hammeqorot,* published by the Historical Dictionary in 1963), being subjected to lexical analysis is specially prepared for the machine ("pre-edited") by a trained worker; every single word has been classified according to its grammatical form (verb, noun, etc.), its meaning has been designated and other data necessary for the editors have been added. The results are then card-punched and checked. The next stage is the programming prepared by a specialist, employed by the Dictionary: the results are fed into the machines. These supply the editors with a list of all entries from every literary work, in alphabetical order, after several countings and sortings—quite complicated procedures in themselves—have been completed. The machines still require the assistance of a scientific worker, since they are unable, at this stage, to extract the root of a verb or separate a word from its prepositional prefix (like *yom* from *leyamim).*

In this fashion, the editors propose to acquire the *entire vocabulary* for the Dictionary from all sources which they intend to lay under contribution. Since, as stated, these works have all been arranged in chronological order at the end of the preparatory phase, the editorial staff will have a complete card index in the order in which the entries will have to appear in the Dictionary. In every entry the quotations, illustrating the diverse meanings of the words, will be given in the order in which they appear in the literary works, i.e., in their historical order. So, from the card index, which necessarily will be enormous in size and comprise millions of quotations, the author will draw all the information necessary for his definitions. For example, all the written forms of a specific word, including the vowel-pointing used at different times and in different communities, all the meanings of the recorded forms, all syntactical usages and the diverse combinations that are used as idiomatic expressions, will be found. *The Book of Ahima'az, Text, Concordance and Lexical Analysis* (Jerusalem, 1965. 273 pp. folio), published by the Historical Dictionary, can serve as a sample of the method adopted by the Editor.

The introduction of mechanographical methods in lexicography has revolutionized the preparation of the Dictionary. It has not eased the task of the lexicographer, as one might think. Indeed the opposite is true. His task is now harder, for the simple reason that he cannot relapse into any routine, for such does not yet exist. From the computer he can only receive what he has put into his programme. Moreover, any error in programming must assume alarming proportions, since it is repeated by the machine over and over again, in completely automatic motion. The scientific worker must pay for his liberation from the dull routine of writing up cards and sorting them by a special vigilance in reading the text and in the manifold tasks of pre-editing.

Our brief experience with this method has taught us that its advantages range beyond the mere saving of time, and the ability to sort and arrange the vast store of material. The real benefits are the high standard of the data compiled through *complete* lexical analysis of the literary sources.

The Historical Dictionary is envisaged as a continuing project. It will not come to an end some day in the future when the final volume is published. It will remain within the precincts of the Academy as a sort of museum of the language, all exhibits of which are registered, classified and arranged in a card-index that will be available for the study of the Hebrew language in all its ramifications.